

“Include me
as we return
to activity.”

Inclusive recovery report:

How sport and activity providers responded and disabled people's experiences as the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions were lifted.

**Executive
summary**

October 2022

activityalliance.org.uk



Contents.

Introduction	3
Key findings	4
How have the benefits of being active changed for disabled people?	4
How have the barriers to being active changed for disabled people?	5
Recommendations.....	7



Introduction.

As physical activity and sports recover following the pandemic, it's more important than ever that disabled people are included and supported in organised activity. Working with BritainThinks, disabled people, and our members, we wanted to understand how barriers and motivations have changed for disabled people, and how providers can support and include disabled people as we recover from this national crisis.

The project provided a qualitative, in-depth exploration to accompany our **Annual Activity and Disability Survey 2021-22**. Our approach embedded the authentic voices of a diverse group of disabled people throughout the study:

- Desk review of previous research.
- Digital two-week online self-ethnography and accessible interviews with 36 disabled people with a range of impairment types and demographic backgrounds.

- Consultation meetings with Activity Alliance members and survey with 41 activity providers.
- A co-production workshop with 8 providers and 19 disabled people.

This summary outlines the key findings, updated motivations and barriers to participation for disabled people, and guidance and tips on providing inclusive organised activities.

The full report is available on our website.



Key findings.

For disabled people:



Most participants still want to be active after the pandemic and feel it will benefit their lives.



The pandemic led to a lack of access to facilities or restrictions on meeting with others – this reduced confidence or motivation for many.



The pandemic has worsened existing challenges for disabled people and led to continued fluctuating involvement and nervousness about participation.

For providers:



The pandemic caused additional challenges for providers. This includes fluctuating or reduced participation, reduced staff or loss of skilled staff, and changes or loss in networks and partnerships, lack of financial stability or even closures.



There is a strong desire among providers to use the pandemic to improve and grow. Despite the increased challenges, providers want to provide more inclusive activities and improve experiences for disabled participants.

How have the benefits of being active changed for disabled people?

The project provided an opportunity to review and explore how the benefits and motivations to be active have changed since the pandemic. We saw the increased importance of mental health, as well as many disabled people focusing on physical benefits, regardless of impairment type. Goals relating to resilience were also a more prominent theme this year.



Mental health: Improved mood, increased confidence and self-esteem, better concentration, memory and general ‘alertness’, better self-care.



Physical health: Feeling “lighter”, more flexible, and mobile, managing impairments or conditions, and staying fit or strong.



Resilience: Overcoming challenges and working towards a goal, gaining a sense of achievement, satisfaction at doing something for yourself.



Social: Meeting new people, developing social skills and connecting with others, being part of a team, preventing isolation and loneliness.



How have the barriers to being active changed for disabled people?

Activity Alliance's previous research had defined the barriers disabled people face to participation, as physical, logistical, and psychological. Through this project, we have developed these further to understand how the pandemic amplified these challenges. We saw worries about physical health and fitness increase as a barrier, as well as less confidence and more doubts. We have highlighted two new barriers: financial, and structural.

Physical:



Concerns over activities or accidents leading to worse functionality or symptoms are more common. Many people have found it harder to manage their impairment or health condition or have seen a loss of fitness or strength.



The pandemic has led to less opportunities and less awareness of activities that are accessible and suitable for disabled people. Concerns about the environment, including places, facilities, and equipment, being unwelcoming or unsuitable continue to prevent participation.



Providers are concerned about having the right facilities, equipment, and training to meet different needs, as well as a COVID-19-safe environment, in a period of resource pressure.

Psychological:



Disabled people are facing increased psychological barriers, particularly lack of confidence, fearing shame or embarrassment, and doubts in ability and fitness – particularly for people who were less active during the pandemic. Motivation may be an issue for some, especially when routines and habits are still affected by the impact of restrictions.



While many providers understand the importance of inclusion, it is not always embedded or prioritised, especially when resources are restricted. Some providers feel challenged to respond to changes in participant needs, like mental health issues, confidence, fitness, COVID-19 concerns, or motivation.

Financial:



Many disabled people are experiencing financial pressures. This limits spending on organised activity sessions, membership or fees, or equipment. Additional costs, like public transport or taxis also present a barrier to accessing activities.



The developing cost-of-living crisis is having a disproportionate impact on disabled people¹. Many people are experiencing stress regarding financial challenges, and frustrations that activities they want to take part in aren't affordable.



Providers are facing significant financial pressures, including reduced or unstable revenue and increased costs in implementing COVID-19 safety protocols. This means less capacity or sessions than previously, and less time to trial new initiatives or implement feedback.

Structural:



The closure of facilities during restrictions had reduced the variety of activities available. There is a lack of widely available accessible activities – or a lack of clear signposting or 'joined-up working' - for organised activity for disabled people in local areas. Broader cultural attitudes, a lack of representation, inaccessibility, and ingrained practices that fail to properly include disabled people have been amplified by the pandemic.



Providers recognise these issues but face key challenges in expanding their offer to reach disabled people due to resource limitations. They also continue to face low awareness of inclusion and inequalities, and challenges with finding capacity and resource to trial new ideas and initiatives.



1. Scope, 'Disabled people hit hardest in biggest cost-of-living crisis in a generation' (2022).

Recommendations.

Participants and providers came together to discuss recommendations on how to remove the barriers identified in this research. When wanting to be active, disabled people have three important asks:

1.

Make it easier for me to find out how to be active again or where to continue my activity.



A range of organised activities are well promoted and readily available.



Information on the activity is clear and easy to understand.



I can physically access the organised activity easily.

To support participants, providers should:

- Promote sessions widely, highlighting information about who the sessions target and accessibility accommodations. Ensure webpages are accessible, and provide offline information.

[Activity Alliance Inclusive Communications Guide.](#)

- Understand who might be excluded from finding or accessing your activity.

[GOGA learning resource on engaging different community groups.](#)

- Work with community groups, Disabled People's User Led Organisations, and local government to reach more potential disabled participants.

[GOGA learning resource on engaging partners to reach the least active.](#)

- Look at ways to reduce transport costs by offering transport, encouraging sharing schemes, walking or cycling, or having deliverers travel to meet participants.



2.

Make me confident that the activity will be a safe, welcoming, and comfortable place for me to participate.



I know where the activity is, the atmosphere or pace of the session, who takes part, and what will be expected.



The processes in place to keep people safe from COVID-19 are clear.



I feel welcomed, included, and comfortable from the moment I arrive to the moment I leave.



I know those delivering activity have experience in offering inclusive activity and can reassure me the activity is safe for my impairment.



There is clear evidence that disabled people have participated and had positive experiences.

To support participants, providers should:

- Offer introductory or taster sessions to give participants opportunities to try a new activity without commitment. Offer opportunities to informally discuss the activity and any adaptations beforehand.
- Understand your customer's journey to ensure a safe and inviting environment with friendly staff and continually improving access standards.

[Leisure factsheet on accessible venues](#) and [Delivering an Excellent Service for Disabled Customers eLearning course](#).

- Maintain and communicate a base level of COVID-19 safety to reassure participants.

[Activity Alliance reopening activity guidance](#).

- Develop testimonials from a range of disabled participants to share positive experiences and address barriers to participation.

[Activity Alliance effective engagement factsheets](#).

- Increase awareness of disability and inclusive approaches across the workforce, including people in informal roles.

[Leisure factsheet on developing an inclusive workforce](#).

- Ensure that deliverers are confident in including disabled people in activities and adapting delivery, whether that activity is designed for disabled people or not.

[Activity Alliance Inclusive Activity Programme](#) and [Richmond Group physical activity and long-term health condition resource packs](#).



3.

Ensure opportunities are available that meet my needs and values.



Providers offer inclusive activity, with adaptations to be inclusive of disabled people and non-disabled people. Facilities and places that are welcoming and accessible, and people who understand my impairments and needs.



Show how the activity connects to my values, and how it will benefit me – improving mental and physical health, resilience, and social opportunities.



The activity works with my budget and any financial constraints I have.

To support participants, providers should:

- Include disabled people in design of sessions and create frequent and easy ways for feedback. Through close working with disabled people, evidence what works to other disabled participants.

[Disability Rights UK co-production guidance](#), [Activity Alliance leisure factsheet on insight and marketing](#) and [Talk to Me report](#).

- Provide guidance on building fitness, mental health, and healthy lifestyles to support people to increase mobility and confidence at their own pace.

[Chartered Society of Physiotherapists guidance](#), [Activity Alliance adapting activities guidance](#), [We Are Undefeatable campaign](#), and [Mind mental health and activity toolkit](#).

- Consider opportunities for groups or regular attendees to socialise, for example a WhatsApp group or virtual catchups.
- Where necessary, trial tailored sessions for smaller groups (e.g. women, or wheelchair users) to increase confidence to participate and provide tailored support and exercises.

[GOGA learning resource on creating activities that put people's needs first](#).

- Demonstrate understanding of current financial pressures - if possible, make your activities financially viable through subsidised activities, flexible and part-time memberships, and free access for support workers. Consider funding avenues that can contribute to running costs.

[Sport England funds and campaigns](#).



More detail on Activity Alliance's response to these findings, including on perceptions and practices, policy, education, and health and social care, can be found in the full report.

The full report is available on our website.



01509 227750



research@activityalliance.org.uk



activityalliance.org.uk



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Photo credit: British Blind Sport,
Dwarf Sports Association UK.

**This document is also available
in accessible Word format. Please
contact us if you need more support.**

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Activity Alliance is the operating name for the English Federation of Disability Sport. Registered Charity No. 1075180.

